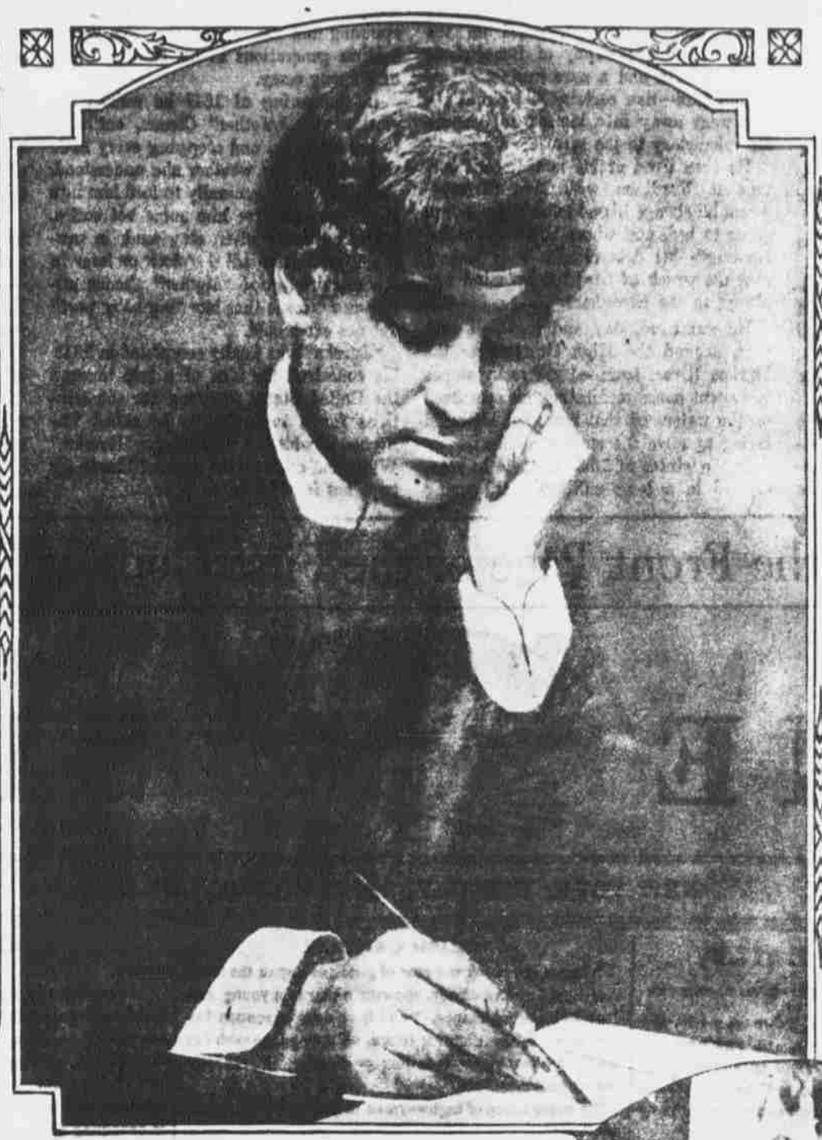
Belasco's Property Room Houses Antique Gems

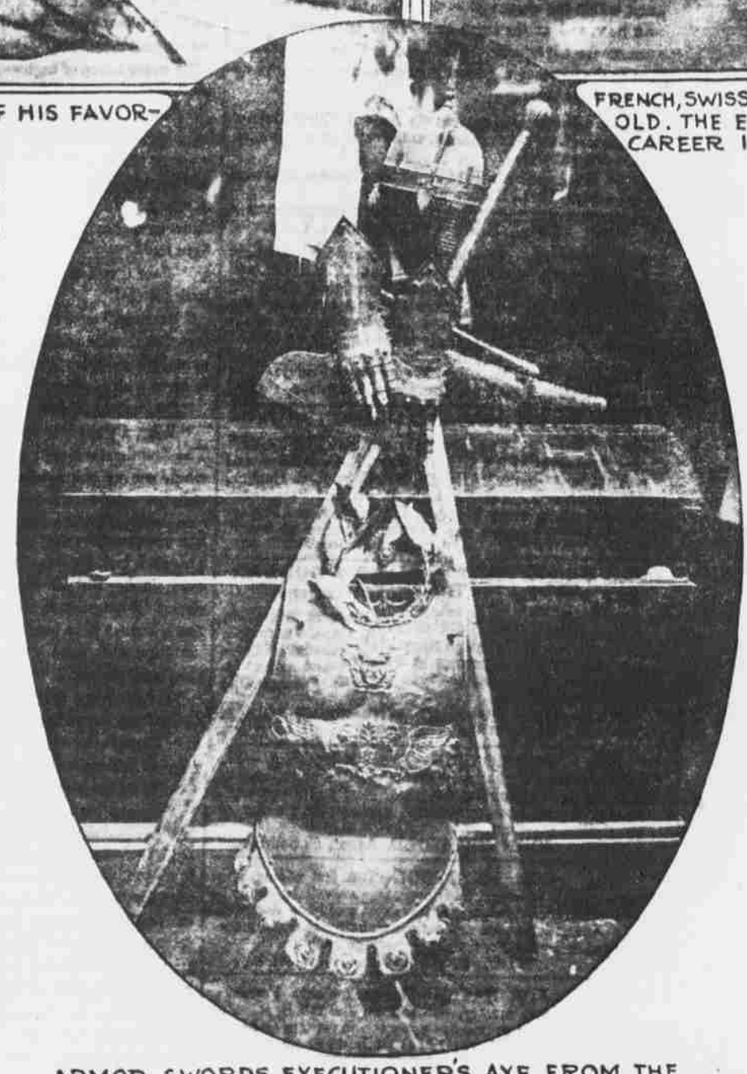
PAINTED BANDBOX OF 1820 CONTAINING WOMEN'S HATS OF THAT ERA WORN BY FRANCIS STARR IN "THE LITTLE LADY IN BLUE."



DAVID BELASCO — ONE OF HIS FAVORITE POSES.

PUNCH AND JUDY FIGURES, BOTH VERY OLD.

FRENCH, SWISS AND ENGLISH CLOCKS, 150 YEARS OLD. THE ENGLISH CLOCK HAD A STAGE CAREER IN "THE LITTLE LADY IN BLUE"



ARMOR, SWORDS, EXECUTIONER'S AXE FROM THE TOWER OF LONDON. MAILED GLOVES AND CASQUE RESTING ON CEDAR CHEST DATED 1765.

Famous Producer Has Cathered Valuable Curios All His Life and Theatre Itself Is Invaded to House Overflow From Studio and Home

By FRANK VREELAND.

FORTUNATE is the man who has a theatre where the memories of past triumphs of the stage linger about rare souvenirs of the occasion, but if that man has also a storage place filled with curios which is considered to be haunted he is thrice blessed, according to current ideas.

In such a happy situation is David Belasco, whose Belasco Theatre is filled with old hand bills of Booth and other stage celebrities and unusual prints of theatrical performances—besides mementoes of Napoleon—so that it might be said to be a paper monument to past glories. In addition he has a storeroom in connection with his warehouse at 511 West Forty-sixth street, where many of his most valuable "props" are kept, dating back to his first managerial experiences, as well as pounds and pounds of the antiques which Mr. Belasco is constantly collecting, even if they are not to be used to make any production more realistic, but merely to complete his assortment of relics.

Lounging Place for Spooks.

It is the collection in this storeroom, valued at $50,000, that is believed by Belasco henchmen to be a favorite lounging place for spooks. As might be expected of the man who revealed a deep interest in psychic matters by his production of "The Return of Peter Grimm" and "The Case of Becky," Mr. Belasco himself holds to the idea that spirits hover about the storeroom—which indicates how wide awake they are, even if dead, to pay attention to such a fascinating display.

Belasco's head property man, Matthew Purcell, firmly believes that this room is the rendezvous for the ghosts of players who even in their other state can't keep away from the paint and trappings of their profession. Mr. Purcell has been with Mr. Belasco eighteen years. His Celtic mysticism may account for his readiness to see a ghost as well as a joke. And by the same token, being Irish, he takes his ghosts humorously and says the ghosts are good fellows if you're not afraid of them.

But he says he's known property men who didn't care to be on speaking terms with the wraiths, and who consequently have come out of the property room screaming. Watchmen from a private agency have refused to go into the place unless accompanied by a property man who isn't afraid of meeting the misty visitors. Concerning one of Mr. Belasco's other storage houses, where the larger scenic investiture is kept, a story is related of a watchman who thought he saw something moving one night and shot the walls full of bullets.

The "haunted" storeroom, the one containing the smaller relics, unquestionably has an eerie atmosphere. It is spooky, indeed, in the dim crepuscular illumination from a dusty skylight, with supernatural forms seeming to float near the ceiling—even though one finds afterward that they're only the silken hangings from "Polly With a Past." Vague, threatening forms seem to lurk in the semi-darkness, and menacing arms seem stretched out for one, but one grows bold on finding them nothing but breastplates, deer antlers, hunting horns and swords—when the lights go on.

The electric bulbs reveal a room about thirty feet long and half as wide, with most of the curios on view in cabinets which must make it very convenient for the ghostly visitors. While looking over the exhibits one hears curious noises—the wailing of children, the yowling of cats, the slamming of a cabinet door behind one's back—and the writer, who heard them, isn't a spiritualist—not while there's plenty of candle-power.

The Array of Relics.

The cabinets which line the walls and occupy the middle of the room have their contents classified and arranged in order. One contains scores of French clocks which have long since ceased to keep tabs on eternity, another has dozens of colonial candlesticks and mediæval lanterns, and a third holds yards of cut glassware of all periods that would cause a high priced smash if any spook started skylarking among them. On wires near the ceiling are strung expensive violins in cases, ancient Indian wicker work which was used in "The Heart of Wetona," and Crusaders' helmets with chain mail netting to ward off stings more vicious than the best Jersey mosquitoes could give.

Altogether it is the oddest jumble of the modern and the antique, the civilized and the savage, that could be huddled together by anything outside of an earthquake. An old French mirror, used in "Du Barry," with its gilt still bright, is hung near an effigy from a venerable Punch and Judy set said to be 150 years old and looking every minuute of it. A large painted fan with a mother of pearl handle, reputed to have been the property of Sarah Siddons, is framed just above pictures of Lincoln, Grant, Lee and Stonewall Jackson, while near by are medicine sticks over which Indians made a fuss whenever they had the stomach ache.

On top of the cabinet roosts an ornate painted handbox of 1820 containing women's hats of that era that were worn by Frances Starr in "The Little Lady in Blue," while right beside it stands a large grocer's tin of graham crackers. In another cabinet is a modern English policeman's dark lantern, while beside it are two archaic flintlock pistols of Turkish make, a blunderbuss a couple of centuries old, and an old English wine basket—a wooden shovel in which the bottle lay on its side for ease in pouring—which to a modern American would possess a highly antiquarian value.

From the top of a French cabinet—a real antique used in "Du Barry"—a bust of Napoleon frowns down on some papier mache bacon used in "Dark Rosaleen"—and frowns quite properly, when one reflects how the Little Corporal was troubled with indigestion. A bristling French private's ear of the time of the Empire stands near a quiet grandfather's clock which appeared in that decidedly peaceful play "The Return of Peter Grimm."

A huge automobile horn that would shake the innards out of a flivver is suspended above a stand in which modern walking sticks jostle gnarled and curly-cued canes of 1810 and 1850, and dainty modern parasols are lined up against a huge umbrella of the earliest type, with whalebone ribs and a spread of over six feet that shows the whole family was meant to be sheltered by it—and that shows the size of the family in those days. A guaranteed Roman breastplate used in "Adrea," Mrs. Leslie Carter's vehicle, is placed alongside an innocuous carved Swiss clock, while underneath a great iron bound chest of the Captain Kidd variety, which was part of the setting for "Sweet Kitty Bellairs," reposes as solidly as though weighted with buried treasure, instead of being stuffed with sofa cushions.

Oddities From the Orient.

Near a Mexican guitar used in "The Rose of the Rancho" and a moon harp played in "The Darling of the Gods" hangs a pair of Chinese torture pliers which were originally intended for use in "The Son-Daughter" and which look like a pair of exaggerated lemon squeezers. Buddhist bronzes and Japanese tea sets of valuable teak wood are mingled with Oriental steel mirrors bought in a New York department store. Beneath a large part of the ceiling spreads the spokes of a large wheel from a loom that is 150 years old and casts its shadow on a set of telephone books from "The Woman," which Property Chief Purcell remarks drily "are being kept as a souvenir of the day when you could get your call.

"And besides," he adds with a twinkle, "they'll be handy if the ghost of one of the men in the cast who died wants to look up a number."

The room is especially prolific in swords. A bushel of them are rammed into a high vase in one corner, and the room sprouts them elsewhere—Roman swords, old English sabres, heavy five foot blades swung in the Crusades, and an ancient English executioner's axe, which Mr. Purcell exhibited as a very efficient means of promoting the acquaintance of ancestors with their descendants.

A cabinet with one of the most interesting arrays in the whole exhibition—which is ticketed and catalogued, by the way—is that containing the bed quilts of the epoch when they used the bed warmers on view in one corner and didn't depend on the janitor for heat. There are comforters and counterpanes with the sort of zigzag designs and chromatic convulsions that would warm a cubist's heart, let alone his feet. Some of them are beautiful even from a modern standpoint, however, and those that are ugly are none the less valuable, like the Paisley shawls, of which Mr. Belasco has his fair share. Many of these coverlets were bought by Mr. Belasco without any intention of applying them to the A. H. Woods kind of production, simply being purchased as part of the entire contents of Gen. Braddock's house in Washington, which Mr. Belasco snapped up as part of his unending campaign to equip himself with a full line of antiques.

Mementoes of Napoleon.

He knows every object in this storeroom by heart, and when he discovers that one of them is missing not even the omniscient property man questions his memory. That singularly retentive memory is one quality which Mr. Belasco has in common with Napoleon and may perhaps account for some of his admiration for the great Corsican, for the manager might be said to have acquired the remnants of Bonaparte's empire.

He has many relics of the Emperor—he even has the last pair of shoes Napoleon wore—and the walls of his executive offices are laden with pictures, many of them rare contemporary prints, showing the conqueror at the height of his glory, in death and being carried to his last resting place. On a trip to France, though Mr. Belasco had only half a day in Paris, it is said that he managed to spend $20,000 for Napoleonic pictures and momentoes in that time.

There are souvenirs of interest in American history, off the stage as well as on. On a wall in the Belasco offices hangs one of the original programmes used for the benefit performance for Laura Keene of "Our American Cousin" at Ford's Theatre in Washington on the night that Abraham Lincoln was assassinated there. W. J. Ferguson, a member of the cast, is still to be found at the Lambs Club. The programme is flanked on each side by affidavits by R. O. Polkinhorn, the printer, and by Peter Harr, foreman of the printing shop, attesting to its authenticity, and the inconspicuous line at the bottom stating that the programme was printed by H. Polkinhorn and Son, printers, D street near 7th, Washington, D. C., is further evidence of its genuineness, for the thrifty printers of fraudulent copies neglected to place this line on their counterfeit programmes.

There are contemporary engravings of the shooting and the pursuit of John Wilkes Booth, and three rare pictures of the assassin. The portrait of his father, Junius Brutus Booth, bulks large in the collection of pictures of stage notables on the walls, for the print shows the elder Booth breathing sulphur and flame in "Richard III." Of course John Wilkes's famous brother, Edwin Booth, is accorded a prominent place in the gallery, and it gives food for thought to observe that "Hamlet" and other of his great Shakespearian revivals were performed at a place called the Winter Garden.

Another interesting Booth programme is that of the celebrated benefit production of "Hamlet" for Lester Wallack at the Metropolitan Opera House on May 21, 1888, with a distinguished cast, including Booth, Lawrence Barrett, Herbert Kelcey, Joseph Jefferson, W. J. Florence, Helena Modjeska and Rose Coghlan—the latter being the only one who can still answer the roll call.

Of particular sentimental esteem are play bills of Mr. and Mrs. Charles Kean, for it was with them that Mr. Belasco made his first stage appearance, being carried on as a baby by Julia Dean in the season of 1857 in "Pizarro," and no doubt being willing, though for the nonce unable, to deliver one of his felicitous curtain speeches. Besides these one finds enormous dodgers advertising performances of Jefferson and Florence in "The Rivals," with a company including Mrs. John Drew and Viola Allen; "The School for Scandal" at Mrs. John Drew's Arch Street Theatre in Philadelphia; E. A. Sothern in "Home" at the London Haymarket; Macready in "The Way to Get Married" at the Theatre Royal, Covent Garden—a question which was seemingly puzzling them as far back as February 8, 1796—and announcements of the famous "Black Crook" at Niblo's Garden and Barnum's Museum.

Odd Facts From Foreign Parts

IT is, except in China, as far from A to B as it is from B to A. Many travellers have commented upon the apparent lack of the knowledge of distances across the country or between towns exhibited by the Chinese. If at one town they inquired the distance to the next they were perhaps told twenty li—one-third of a mile; but upon arriving at that town they were surprised to learn that the distance back to the starting point was estimated at twenty-four li, and that the cost of journeying back was correspondingly greater than the cost of the journey hither. This peculiarity extends also to travel by river, the distance upstream being greater than that downstream. The confusion which has thus arisen has been incomprehensible to foreigners.

Yet the Chinese method of measuring is not altogether illogical. The unit of measurement is not with the Chinese a unit of length, but a unit of energy. He measures a distance, not by the actual space passed over, but by the amount of physical energy reqaired to cover the space.

His wage is based on a unit of energy, which is the amount it would take to carry a given load—one picul (133 pounds) one li on level ground. If the road is down hill the distance is regarded as less than the actual linear distance, because it is supposed to take less energy to travel in that direction, or, as the Chinese puts it, "The li are short."

It naturally follows that, travelling in the opposite direction, the road being an ascent, a greater expenditure of energy is necessary. "The li are long," and in order to get a fair compensation for their work the carriers must see that the distance and the corresponding charges are increased. This way of estimating the distance makes the Chinese system of measurement seem simple and even rational.

THE most conspicuous of jellyfishes is the Portuguese man-of-war, which lives in the warmer parts of the Atlantic, but which is carried far northward by the Gulf Stream and often drifts ashore along the coast of the United States.

Its air filled buoy is sometimes six inches long, and has along the top a highly colored crest or sail that can be lowered at will. Beneath are many tentacles and protruding mouth parts. The tentacles of the man-of-war can hold fishes over six inches in length, although the creature usually takes those of smaller size.

It grasps anything with which its long tentacles come in contact, and as the tentacles can stretch down forty or fifty feet below, fishes of any size may become entangled. The largest fishes doubtless break away, but the tentacles are covered with stinging cells that soon weaken and disable the victim, which the jellyfish then draws gradually closer to its body, where the numerous protruding and dise tipped stomachs seize and absorb the soft parts but leave the bones and scales almost intact.

The sting of the tentacles is instant and painful to the human hand. There is a species of small fish, known as the man-of-war pilot, that is apparently immune to the paralyzing touch of the tentacles, since it lives habitually under their shelter. Several of the pilot fish may accompany a single man-of-war. When disturbed by larger fishes they seek refuge among the trailing tentacles, where the pursuing fishes often meet their fate. The remarkable immunity of the pilots may be owing to some secretion that prevents the stinging cells of the tentacles from adhering to them.